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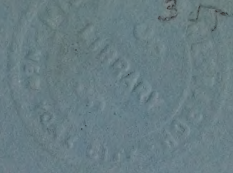

VISION

Stories of Great Men who had it to a marked degree

An interview with JOHN R. MOTT General Secretary of THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE of YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATIONS

By BRUCE BARTON

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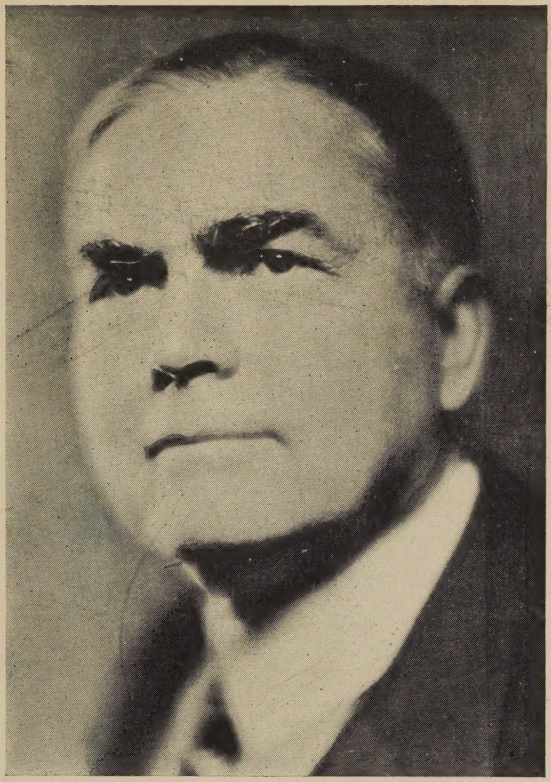

JOHN R. MOTT

VISION

WITH a man whose name I do not know, I sat on the observation platform of a transcontinental train while the glistening rails unwound themselves behind us across the surface of the Great Salt Lake—a roadbed of solid rock, as disdainful of the angry little waves on either side as a giant snapped at by puppies. They had fought a game battle, those waters; for many months they scattered and hid the rock as fast as loaded freight trains could haul it; mockingly they tossed themselves at the puny men who should have known better than to try to do a thing which could not be done.

As often as the men were beaten, they returned with bigger locomotives and trains more heavily loaded, until finally the mocking laughter died out of the waters and sullenness settled on them. Up through the surface the roadway pushed its huge shoulders, *and stayed;* the waves still snarl and snap, but the fight is gone out of them. The rock alone they might have conquered; the Thing they could not conquer is harder than rock—the will of a man who, seeing in his mind's eye the job already completed, will not rest until it is complete.

My companion on the platform tossed his cigar into the lake, thrust his hands into his pockets and took a deep breath.

"Always like to come back by this route," he exclaimed. "Sort of stiffens your backbone to think of that little chap Harriman. Everyone told him he couldn't build his railroad across the lake; but he went ahead and built it. All they saw in the road anyhow was a couple of streaks of rust. *He* saw the West, and he invested every penny he could beg or borrow. Anybody else could have bought the stock at the same price he paid; all it needed was Vision."

With a friend I rode through the highlands of Kentucky, to the crest of a hill which commands a view of the campus and buildings of Berea College. Every fall two or three thousand boys and girls make their way down the valleys from their mountain cabins to Berea; every spring they go back again, each one an apostle of progress. You can trace their influence all through the mountains by farms that are better cultivated, by homes better built, by meals better cooked.

"I doubt if any other institution in America influences more people, directly and indirectly," said my friend. "It's a great monument to William Goodell Frost. I visited the 'college' when he took hold as president, a one-horse affair if ever there was one. You wouldn't have given much for his chance of putting it across. But Frost had the Vision."

There are certain mystery words in the language, and "Vision" is one of them. In what does it consist? By what magic does it transform the son of a penniless parson, like Harriman, into a multi-millionaire? It builds colleges and cathedrals and factories; it leads nations to greatness and men—a few men—to fame.

But how? No one stops to define the word; everybody uses it quite casually as though we were all perfectly agreed as to what it means. John R. Mott, executive head of the Young Men's Christian Association, used it one night, as we were sitting together in front of an open fire.

He had just returned from Washington, where he had transacted business with three Presidents in a little less than two hours—with Harding, Wilson, and Taft. Has any other man in history, I wonder, ever had dealings with three Presidents of the United States on the same morning? It certainly sounds like a record and, if so, it is only one of a number of records which belong to John R. Mott. No other American has addressed so many audiences in so many different cities; no other has ever spoken so often in all corners of the world to great crowds, through an interpreter; few have traveled so constantly back and forth around the globe. When the war broke out in 1914 it was said that Mott knew personally the premier of every country, on both sides. For more than thirty years his business has been with the young men of the whole world and, as an incident of the progress of that business, he has had to be on terms of acquaintance or friendship with whatever emperor or president or czar happened to be in a position to hinder or help.

He was speaking that evening about a man he had met in Washington, a man whom he watched as a college student back in the nineties. It is a tragic thing, he said, how some careers, which open with so much promise, shrivel and end in futility. This man had wealth and social position; he was a leader both

in scholarship and student activities; his university expected much of him. Yet in his own city in the Middle West he has allowed the sphere of his interests and enthusiasm to contract year by year, until his influence is dead and his name forgotten.

"I couldn't help contrasting him with another man who was in a different university at about the same time," said Mott. "He lacked some of the favoring factors which entered into the life of the other; and his disadvantage was added to, apparently, by the fact that he went to the Orient after his graduation. But out there he rendered such conspicuous service, and made such an impression, that he was heard of in New York; he came back to Wall Street and in a few years established a recognized leadership. He went to France with the army and died, still a young man; but in his short life he had built himself into dozens of activities that still carry forward under the enthusiasm he imparted."

"There is only one man who fits that description," I said. "You must mean Willard Straight."

"Yes, Willard Straight," he answered. "The other man had all the advantages, apparently; but he never saw beyond his own business and social circle. Straight had Vision.

It was too good an opportunity to be missed. There was the word that eludes definition, and here, sitting in front of the fire, was the man who, probably more than any other American, has seen the word at work.

"I wish you would talk about some of the Men of Vision you have known," I said to him. "And tell

me one thing, particularly: Is this mysterious quality something that only one in a million can possess—a gift, like rich parents, or talent for music? Or is it latent in average folks, needing only to be recognized and fostered? How do you discover it in the men you employ? Who was the first man you met who had it in unusual measure?"

IT WAS a good fire and the chairs were comfortable. I threw on another log and turned out the lamp. Somehow, firelight seemed appropriate for a talk about Vision. How many men, I wondered, have dreamed dreams and conquered empires in front of an open fire?

"I don't have to hesitate over your last question," Doctor Mott began. "The first man of really great vision whom I knew well was Dwight Lyman Moody. You do not hear his name so frequently these days, for events move fast and even outstanding men are quickly forgotten; but I think I could undertake to guide you to at least a hundred cities in this country and point out some beneficent institution, or influential man, or group of influential men, as living proofs of the vision of D. L. Moody.

"You remember his story. When he was four years old his father died, leaving nine children. The little stony farm was mortgaged and the creditors took everything, even the kindling from the wood pile. Dwight was tossed about from pillar to post, receiving a very meager schooling—he was never a scholar in any sense—until, at the age of seventeen, he was offered a place in a store on condition that he attend church and Sunday-school regularly. The part of Boston where

he lived was dense and dirty, filled with ragged youngsters. It was not long until Moody had recruited a corps of them as a Sunday-school class, and in that crowd of rough-talking, hard-hitting young rowdies Moody found his vision. From that day he lost his enthusiasm for making money and became an enthusiast about men. Having saved a thousand dollars, he resigned his job and went to work heart and soul in the mission he had established. You can easily imagine the consternation of his relatives and practical advisers.

" 'Your thousand dollars will be gone in no time,' they exclaimed; as, indeed, it was.

" 'Never mind,' replied Moody. 'I am working for God, and He is rich.'

"In that faith, backed up by tremendous energy, he set out on his career, which exerted an influence on his generation hardly second to that of any other man.

"You ask me to give a working definition of vision, and I should say in answer that it is the capacity—

To see what others do not see.

To see further than they see.

To see *before* they see.

"The third part of the definition is fully as important as the other two. George W. Perkins had framed in his office a quotation from Roosevelt which ought to be in almost every office: 'Nine tenths of wisdom is being wise *in time*.' A man may be greatly hampered by education or opportunity; he may be able to see only a few inches beyond his competitors. But if he trains himself to keep looking, if he can manage to see those few inches twenty-four hours ahead of the crowd, that is all the advantage he needs.

"Moody had vision of all three sorts. He had a wonderful power of looking into men and seeing possibilities which the world had not discovered, and of which even the possessors were often unconscious. Literally, I never saw him discouraged about any man; there was always something good, something that could be stirred and appealed to. Now, just think for a minute what power that sort of vision gives. The amount that any one of us can accomplish is governed by the tools with which we must work; and those tools, in most instances, are other men. If we go through life suspicious of other men, expecting nothing great of them, prepared for repeated disappointments, we are merely dulling our own tools. Moody expected *much* from every man he met; and the man, rising to meet the expectation, became twice as effective or ten times as effective a tool for Moody's work.

IN THE same way he had a vision of the cities that he visited. They might be dirty, and sodden, and lacking in pride or spiritual enthusiasm—Moody never saw them so. He saw them transformed by the power of a great ideal and of a great Saviour; he would stand before an audience which had come into the huge hall apathetic and, it might be, unexpectant, and picture to them the possibilities of human life in that city with an audacity that was perfectly sublime. And the audience went out with his vision to make some part of it, at least, come true.

"Finally, he had a vision of money in its power to work for human betterment, and he held that vision up before the men of wealth in such a way that hos-

pitals, city missions, association buildings, colleges, and churches literally blossomed under his touch. One of his biographers tells an incident which is worth quoting:

"He set out one day with a prominent clergyman in Edinburgh to raise money for a mission in that city. The minister, who was known and had access everywhere, went from one home to another, asking for ten pounds or fifteen, and congratulated himself on his success. But Moody was far from happy.

" 'I saw it was going to take all winter at that gait,' he said. 'And so (not daring to criticize him), when we came to the next house (that of a very grand and wealthy woman) I said, "How much are you going to ask *her* for?"

" ' "Oh, perhaps fifty pounds."

" 'I kept still, but when the door opened into the room where she was, I just pushed ahead and said:

" ' "Madam, I have come to ask you for two thousand pounds to help build a new mission down at Carrubers Close."

" 'She threw up both hands and exclaimed, "Oh, mercy! Mr. Moody, I cannot possibly give more than *one* thousand."

" 'This reply astonished the timid minister so much that he almost fainted, and when we got outside he said: "You'd better go ahead." And I did.'

"I am not sure whether Moody and Andrew Carnegie ever met," Doctor Mott continued. "If they did they must have enjoyed each other. Of all the men of business whose vision had impressed me, and there have been many, I think Carnegie deserves to be

mentioned first. Always he saw a little farther and a little sooner than those who were pitted against him; his whole life teems with evidence on this point. When hardly more than a boy in years he had seen in the Pennsylvania Railroad Company's works the first small bridge built of iron. It proved a success.

"'I saw that it would never do to depend further upon wooden bridges for permanent railway structures,' he writes. 'An important bridge on the Pennsylvania Railroad had recently burned, and the traffic had been obstructed for eight days.'

"Thousands of men saw, or read about, that fire. To them it suggested nothing except that a new wooden bridge would have to be built.

HERE is a paragraph by Carnegie himself to the same effect:

"While visiting the Continent of Europe in 1867, and deeply interested in what I saw, it must not be thought that my mind was not upon affairs at home. Frequent letters kept me advised of business matters. The question of railway communication with the Pacific had been brought to the front by the Civil War, and Congress had passed an act to encourage the construction of a line. The first sod had just been cut at Omaha and it was intended that the line should ultimately be pushed through to San Francisco. One day, while in Rome, it struck me that this might be done much sooner than was then anticipated. The Nation, having made up its mind that its territory must be bound together, might be trusted to see that no time was lost in accomplishing it. I wrote my

friend, Mr. Scott, suggesting that we should obtain the contract to place sleeping cars upon the great California line. His reply contained these words:

" 'Well, young man, you *do* take time by the forelock."

"Out of this flash of vision, promptly acted upon, grew the negotiations which resulted in the formation of the Pullman Company. Carnegie had been wise *in time.* But many men in their youth have vision, only to lose it, and draw more and more into themselves as they advance into middle age," Doctor Mott continued. "The inspiring thing about Carnegie was the fact that his vision kept so clear and keen up to the very end of a long life. It was pathetic to hear him tell of his hunger for books as a boy; but even as he talked about it his eyes would light up, he would lean forward and begin to tell of his libraries, and how he meant to put good books within the reach of boys in every town, so that no boy, in the future, should starve as he had.

"The war thrust deep into Carnegie's heart and undoubtedly hurried his death. He had dreamed so long of a warless world and invested so heavily in his dream, building the splendid palace at The Hague, and establishing his international foundations of various sorts. Yet even through the smoke and suffering of the battle he kept his eyes focused on his vision. He began to see before the end that out of the war must come some sort of international understanding, that all which he and other great builders had done in drawing the world close together with bands of steel, and wire,

and ships, and other methods of communication, especially in the promotion of conference, consultation, and common action, must necessarily bear fruit. So he died, as he had lived, discounting discouragements, refusing to accept any limitation as final, looking always at the something better and bigger just beyond.

"Thus, though they differed so widely in externals, Moody and Carnegie seem to me to belong together, as illustrating the power of vision. And with them, if I were to select a representative from the statesmen I have known, I should put Roosevelt. He lived so much in the limelight, so many of the illustrations of his vision and vigorous action in obedience to that vision have been printed, that dozens of anecdotes occur to any who knew him.

"Once when I saw him in the White House I happened to mention the fact that I was preparing a little book on the 'Future Leadership of the Church,' and a series of accompanying pamphlets. Now, that is rather a technical subject, so to speak, not a matter in which a busy President of the United States might be expected to show any special interest. He had a thousand problems on his calendar pressing for decision; the most that could have been expected from him was a casual word of friendly interest. But Roosevelt kindled at once.

" 'I'd like to write a letter to go with that book and those pamphlets,' he exclaimed.

"I told him that I should be delighted, of course; and I went away, supposing either that he would forget the suggestion, or that I should receive a brief note,

bearing obvious evidence of the pressure under which it had been prepared. Imagine then my surprise to receive within a week a long, carefully-thought-out letter—a real, outstanding contribution to the purpose which the book was seeking to express.

A FEW months later I called on him again, this time just before a journey to Russia, where I had been invited to address the students of the principal universities; and an almost identical thing happened.

"'I want to send a message to the young men of Russia,' he exclaimed. 'Will you take it for me?'

"The message proved to be a four-page letter, which reached me in New York shortly before I sailed. It revealed marvelous foresight as well as insight regarding the limitless possibilities of the Russian peoples."

"These incidents have no great historical significance," Doctor Mott went on. "Hundreds of men could tell Roosevelt stories of the same character. But trivial as they are, they throw a great light on the secret of Roosevelt's power. His vision saw an opportunity in even the smallest occasions; the great structure of his influence was built up out of thousands of little things. I say to men sometimes, 'If you have lost something, the place to look for it is where you think you lost it.' If you have lost vision, the place to find it is at your right hand. Moody found his vision in the crowd of urchins who lived in the same street; Carnegie found the vision of his bridge company in that crude little iron bridge in the Pennsylvania shops; Roosevelt saw in every man who came to him an opportunity to broaden his influence for good.

"That seems to me to be a partial answer to another part of your question," Doctor Mott continued, "the part in which you ask whether vision is a quality that only one in a million can hope to have, or whether the seeds of it are in all of us. The beginnings of vision are in us all; we cannot quarrel with fate on that score. So sure am I on this point, so confident that vision develops with exercise, like a muscle, that the tests I apply to men who are to be associated with me are tests that seek primarily to determine whether *the processes of development are at work.* Of course I want to know a man's background, and to have his own statement of his purposes, as he conceives them. But beyond that I want to know not how far ahead he thinks he can see at the moment, but whether growth has stopped or is going vigorously on.

THESE are the tests:

"1. *Does he do little things very well?* A great deal was said and written, especially during the war, about executives who take no cognizance whatever of details. My experience with executives has been that the biggest of them are frequently 'detail men' to a degree which would astonish the man on the street. They delegate great powers, to be sure; but the little things which they touch—and they touch many of them—they care for with a fine precision and thoroughness. No man can be more damaging in any organization than a would-be executive who, in his reach for larger things, despises and neglects the little responsibilities confided to his care. Such men are visionary, not men of vision.

"2. *Has he learned the meaning of order as to time and place?* Napoleon fought his earlier and most brilliant battles against forces far superior to his own. But he arrived always a little *before* the opposing generals expected him. Men who have the beginnings of vision get to the place of their engagements at the time appointed, or a little before.

"3. *Has he learned the meaning of priorities?* Does he do first things first? So few men think things through before they start. Hence the work of the world is constantly delayed because some perfectly well-meaning individual, who has been working with good conscience, is busy on an operation that ought to be Number 20, when he should have started and finished Number 1.

"4. *How does he use his leisure?* If I can know what a man does on street cars and trains, on holidays, and in the free hours of the evenings, I can give a pretty good guess as to where he is headed and how likely he is to arrive. The first time I saw Roosevelt after his election to the Presidency he was standing in the rear corridor of a Pullman car, where he had slipped away to escape the reporters and politicians who had been crowding around him all day long. I was curious enough to discover what book he had in his hand. *He was reading Plutarch's 'Lives.'*

"5. *Has he intensity?* Emerson said, 'Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm.' There are men who come into our office bringing something electric with them; you feel the throb of their interest even before they speak. And there are other men who bring nothing but the vague, undefined

desire for a job. Unless I, myself, am stirred, even if only a little, by the energy and magnetism of a man, I have very grave doubts whether he will create much of a stir in any position he may seek to fill. This may sound very unscientific; it may seem to attach an undue importance to first impressions. But, after all, business is made up of a succession of first impressions; few busy men have time to read letters of recommendation, and few discerning men attach great importance to them. They warm toward a man, or are cold, according to the thrill, or the lack of thrill, which he carries with him when he steps through the door.

"6. Moreover, I want to be sure on this point: *Has he learned to take advantage of momentum?* Or does he, with a small success, lean back upon his oars? Almost every biography you read impresses you with this fact—that, while it may take years to lay the foundation of a big achievement, the achievement itself is a matter of a few years, sometimes of a few months. It is like one of these modern skyscrapers, whose parts have been fashioned in steel mills hundreds of miles away. Day after day you pass what appears to be only a hole in the ground, sunk with painful toil through the solid rock. Then the foundations appear, and suddenly, as if by a miracle, the building is buckled together and stands complete. Businesses are like that; men are like that. A man will work for years preparing himself; at length comes a little recognition, a little success. That is the crucial time. If he slackens his effort, if he begins then to take things a little easier, he has staked out the boundaries of his career. But momentum, rightly accelerated, increases in geometric

ratio; there are times when *a month is worth a decade* if a man who has been pushing hard knows how to push just a little harder.

THOSE are not new tests," Doctor Mott concluded. "All executives, I imagine, apply them in one form or another. If a young man measures up to them, even thought his vision at that moment extends only to the job immediately before him, I feel pretty confident that he is coming out all right. He can develop his vision. There are three perfectly definite things which he can do to develop it:

"First of all, he can mingle with people who have vision. They are not all in New York or Chicago; every Main Street has men in whose presence it is easier to believe. Nor are all the men of vision still alive; thousands of them live only in books, and must be cultivated there. In my own library the largest section is devoted to biography; it is a favorite form of reading with me. I have already referred to that time when I found Roosevelt, at the beginning of his Presidency, renewing his friendship with the great statesmen and generals and sages of the ancient world. I went home from that trip and dug out my own copy of Plutarch and read it through again. I finished with a renewed consciousness that no man can spend long hours with Plutarch's characters and not take on quality. The Men of Vision are our slaves; every book shop offers us the service of their inspiration and guidance, for a few pennies. How shortsighted we are if we pass our whole lives in the company of those who are no bigger than ourselves.

THERE is some power in nature that enlarges and lengthens a man's vision. Just how to define it I do not know, but I have experienced it myself and many men have testified to it. It is, in my judgment, the second source of help open to every man. Cecil Rhodes, you remember, built his house in a place which commanded a view of the great Table Mountain. When I was there I was told that it always made him uncomfortable when a visitor sat with his back to that wonderful outlook; Rhodes would stir uneasily in his chair and finally ask the visitor to turn around. Sitting there, often alone, and looking out over the audacious achievements of nature, he built the dreams that became an empire. It is not by chance, as someone has remarked, that all the great religions have come to us out of the East. There is something in the vast expanses of the desert which sets the souls of men to brooding on the wide-reaching and eternal things. I said a little while ago that the place to find vision is right around you, and I do not mean to say anything which will contradict or detract from that statement. But many men never see, because they do not take the time to think. It is worth while at frequent intervals to get away, into the woods or mountains, or beside the ocean or on the edge of the great plains, and there to revise our petty and immediate concerns in the presence of Nature, whose spaces are so vast and whose processes are so patient, so eternal.

"Finally, there is Faith, the third source of vision and the most important. You know there is a verse in the Bible which reads: 'Faith is the substance of things hoped for.' I have never liked that translation; the

marginal reading seems to make the meaning much clearer. 'Faith,' it says, is *the giving of substance to things hoped for.*' That throws a very different light on the matter, doesn't it? Plenty of people talk about Faith, by which they mean a flabby hope that somehow everything will come out all right. That Faith is futile, it disgraces the name. Real Faith says: 'I believe in myself. I believe in other men.' As Moody did. As Carnegie did, suggesting as his chief claim to fame that he had 'known how to get men around me who had more brains than myself.' And, 'I believe in the significance of the universe, that somehow behind it there is a great guiding Mind.'

"In crossing the Pacific last spring I talked for a long time with Admiral Baron Kato, on his way home from the Washington Conference, now premier of Japan, and one of the powers of the present-day world. Said he very earnestly:

"'All the peoples of the world are looking to America for light and faith.'

"For the faith which *sees* clearly and works *confidently* to bring things to pass."